

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Three Nuts**

Once upon a time there was a Prince who was a great lover of the chase, and although his parents had strictly forbidden him to go hunting, he went into the forest one day all the same. There he doggedly pursued a deer until it took refuge in a large and beautiful house which was suddenly there before the surprised hunter; however, he followed the deer even into this sanctuary. But this house was an enchanted castle, and inside it there lived three beautiful Princesses under the strict supervision of their parents, who were wicked sorcerers. No sooner had the youth entered than a solid portcullis fell down behind him, and he found himself a prisoner.

The old wizard at once set him a task through which he could free himself. He had to cut up a large pile of wood with a wooden axe and a wooden saw, and if he did not accomplish this – so came the threat – he would lose his life. While the Prince was despondently reflecting on the impossibility of this onerous task, and already preparing himself for his unavoidable death, one of the Princesses walked in to him and said, kindly and compassionately, “Rest now, weary youth, I shall free you from care and accomplish for you this task that lies beyond your power.” Soon the Prince fell into a slumber, the pursuit of the deer having exhausted him, and when he awoke the hard task was done. He thanked the lovely maiden, and it so happened that her beauty and kindness captivated all of his heart. He secretly offered her his heart and his hand, and the fair maiden accepted with a smile, but she also sadly informed him that he and she would have hard battles to fight before they could reach their goal. “For,” she said, “my parents will set a day on which I will appear before you with my two sisters, all of us dressed in unison, and in addition, our faces will be covered, so

that the great similarity of our figures will make it difficult for you to tell me apart from them; but if you erroneously choose one of my sisters, it will cost you your life – and perhaps also cost me mine, as punishment for taking pity on you. Yet I shall, dear heart, give you a sign to recognise me by: you see here on my neck a blue vein, which will make known to you the anxious beating of my heart; my sisters do not have this so visibly.” The fearful day of the difficult choice arrived. The Prince was led into a room in which the sisters, who were exactly alike, were sitting, dressed in unison, with their parents. For a long time he regarded the three maidenly forms in doubt and anxiety, but all of a sudden he noticed the pulsing vein in the neck of his chosen bride, who was now promised to him by the parents. But they both harboured anger and ill-will against the youngest Princess – for it was she who was the Prince’s beloved – and they would have liked to see this good fortune fall to one of their elder daughters. But the clever bride knew this very well, and as she also had some knowledge of the magic arts, she gave some objects in the palace the following secret power: whenever her mother asked, with hostile intent, if she and the Prince were asleep, a voice would invariably answer No. In the night the mother really did come, and she asked, time after time, “Are you asleep?” Three times did “No!” ring out. But the fourth time there was silence. The mother, now believing them to have fallen asleep, called out to the father, “Now is the time, now you can kill the Prince!” The attentive ears of the Prince and the Princess did not fail to hear this; they hurriedly fled, and when the father stepped into the bedchamber with a spear, he found it empty. After the bridal pair had fled some distance, the bride said, “Look around, my back is burning hot.” The

Prince did as she said, and looking around, he perceived a large raven behind him. When he told this to the Princess, for she dared not turn around herself, she said in alarm, "The black raven, that is my mother who has changed herself into that form; I shall quickly change myself into a garden and you into a gardener, but keep careful watch over the flowers so she does not pick any." The transformation immediately ensued and the raven swarmed around the blooming garden, squawking all the while; however, the gardener was well on his guard against any flower being purloined, and he forcefully repulsed the bird. After a lengthy and vain endeavour to succeed in taking a flower, the raven finally flew away, screeching hideously. The Princess and the Prince now assumed their natural forms again and hurried on. After some time the bride said again, "Look around, my back is burning hot." The Prince looked around and perceived a large bird of prey. When he told this to his bride, she turned herself into a pond and her beloved into a duck. The bird swiftly swooped down and drank the water up so completely that not a drop remained, then it flew up into the air and dropped three nuts, crying out, "With these, my daughter, shall you make your fortune!" This bird was the transformed father of the Princess. The bridal pair now took on their natural forms once again, and not long afterwards they reached a mill. But by now the Prince was weary of the magic tricks and transformations; he thought of his parents, who did not know what had become of him, and he said to his companion, "My dearest, hide yourself now in this mill, and recover your strength; I shall first go back to my homeland, for my old parents die of grief if I do not return, then I shall come here for you and conduct you to my home with due ceremony." The

Princess sadly walked into the mill, and as she wished to remain unrecognised she hired herself out as a maid and served there.

The Prince went away to his homeland. And he soon forgot the good bride, even though she had freed and saved him, and he became betrothed to another Princess. The abandoned girl in the mill heard this news, and taking her leave, she sadly went to the unfaithful one's castle. Here she opened one of the three nuts and a magnificent gown spread out. Then the Princess went with the precious garment to the Prince's new bride and had it sent in to her. It pleased the bride inordinately, and she at once had the owner shown in to her, and asked her what she wanted for it. She wanted to be admitted to the Prince's chamber without anyone else being present. The bride promised this and decided the hour at which the Princess might approach the Prince. But when the tête-à-tête was to take place, and the Princess entered the Prince's chamber, she found him asleep, for the wicked bride had given him a sleeping potion to prevent him from talking with the woman who desired to speak with him. Seeing herself thus outwitted, the poor girl went away in tears and opened her second nut. An even more beautiful dress flowed out, and the Princess did with it as she had done with the first. The acquisitive bride was eager to have this dress as well, so she promised the Princess that she should talk with the Prince without anyone being present; but she had a large, trained dog which she let in to the Prince's chamber shortly before the Princess entered, and it barked at her so loudly and dreadfully that she was terrified and could not utter a word, and she had to retire in tears, for it refused to be pacified by the Prince. Now she had recourse to the third nut, and on her opening it,

the most exquisite gown of all, one more beautiful than any ever seen on earth, came out. Once again she went to the Princess Bride, but this time she had her give her word that she be permitted to *talk* with the Prince; she would not leave the dress otherwise. Then the splendour of the gown and the bride's passion for finery and vanity triumphed over her jealousy and malice, and she granted the requested interview.

Now when the Princess walked up to the Prince, she disclosed her identity to him and gently reproached him for the wrong he had done her; and she also told him how obdurately and craftily her tête-à-tête with him had twice been thwarted. Then all affection for his bride disappeared from the Prince's heart and turned once again to the gentle and long-suffering Princess. He took her to his parents and discarded that other bride, but she was allowed to keep the gowns. However, when she tried to bedeck herself with them, they fell off her body, one after the other, as nothing more than rags.